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# Action research with young people: possibilities and 'messy realities'

*Barry Percy-Smith, Morena Cuconato, Christian Reutlinger, Nigel Patrick Thomas*

## **Abstract**

This paper reflects on our experiences of using participatory action research (PAR) with young people as part of an EU H2020 project<sup>1</sup> exploring the spaces and styles of youth participation in formal, non-formal and informal settings. The paper outlines key tenets of action research and provides a brief review of the literature concerning the use of PAR in youth research. Drawing on three case studies, we provide an honest account of some of the messy realities involved in realising the promise of participatory action research in practice. The central focus is on how the action research played out in practice, the challenges of undertaking PAR within the context of a funded project with predefined deliverables, the power relationships between researchers and young people and how agendas are negotiated in action research. We conclude with some critical reflections on lessons learnt, highlighting the importance of acknowledging the exploratory nature of PAR and the critical role of the researcher as facilitator.

*Key words:* action research, PAR, young people, participation, reflection, knowledge

*Aktionsforschung mit jungen Menschen: Möglichkeiten und "chaotische" Realitäten*

## **Zusammenfassung**

Dieser Artikel reflektiert unsere Erfahrungen mit der partizipativen Aktionsforschung (PAR) mit jungen Menschen im Rahmen des EU-H2020-Projekts „Partispace“, in welchem Räume und Stile der Beteiligung junger Menschen in formellen, nicht formellen und informellen Settings untersucht wurden. Der Aufsatz umreißt die wichtigsten Grundsätze der Aktionsforschung und gibt einen kurzen Überblick über die Literatur zur Verwendung von PAR in der Jugendforschung. Anhand von drei Fallstudien aus dem Projekt „Partispace“ geben wir einen Überblick über einige der nicht vorhersehbaren, mitunter auch chaotisch anmutenden Realitäten, die bei der Umsetzung partizipativer Aktionsforschung in der Praxis entstehen. Wir zeigen auf, wie sich die Aktionsforschung in der Praxis abgespielt hat, welche Herausforderungen es mit sich bringt, PAR im Rahmen eines geförderten Projekts mit vordefinierten Ergebnissen durchzuführen. Des Weiteren diskutieren wir, welche Machtverhältnisse zwischen Forschenden und Jugendlichen bestehen und wie die konkrete Umsetzung in der Aktionsforschung ausgehandelt wird. Wir schließen unsere Ausführungen mit einigen kritischen Überlegungen zu den gewonnenen Erkenntnissen und heben hervor, wie wichtig es ist, den explorativen Charakter von PAR und die kritische Rolle der Forschenden als Vermittler\*innen anzuerkennen.

*Schlagwörter:* Aktionsforschung, PAR, junge Menschen, Partizipation, Reflexion, Wissen

# 1 Introduction

During recent decades, a rich seam of qualitative and ethnographic research has supported a conception of young people as social actors, recognising their values and experiences in their own right, alongside policies that promote young people's rights and encourage their participation in decision-making (*Loncle et al. 2012; Percy-Smith/Thomas 2010*). Young people are increasingly seen as citizens able to engage as partners in making sense of and taking action in their own lives (*Kirby et al. 2003*). Across Europe and elsewhere, attention has focused on developing structures and processes to support young people to 'have a say', and also to take more active roles in research (*Clark et al. 2001*). At the same time, the limitations of these structures and processes have prompted a move to 'new democratic arenas' (*Cornwall/Coelho 2007*) where young people evolve their own styles and spaces of participation.

The terms 'citizen engagement', 'youth participation' and 'co-production' reflect a growing interest in participatory approaches that seek to democratise the research process by sharing power with participants. However, there is an innate contradiction in pursuing participatory objectives within contexts of 'scientific' research where methods and outcomes are predefined, often leaving space only for token participation. Action research is one form of participatory research that enables participants to engage in all stages of the research process, that questions and challenges power and established wisdoms and instead values different kinds of knowing. It is a learning-based approach involving collaborative inquiry (rather than just data collection) that aims to challenge assumptions and develop alternative understandings and practices through cycles of learning, action and reflection (*Weil 1998*). 'Action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve [...] their own practices, their understanding of these practices and the situations in which the practices are carried out' (*Carr/Kemmis 1986*, p. 162). However, this can be difficult to achieve where research is driven by externally defined objectives approved by funders.

The Horizon 2020 project 'Spaces and Styles of Participation: Formal, non-formal and informal possibilities of young people's participation in European cities' (PARTISPACE)<sup>2</sup> was concerned with exploring styles and spaces of youth participation, in response to concerns that young people are 'not participating'. Our starting point was that young people are participating, but not always in ways that are recognised as such. The project included a (participatory) action research phase, providing a space for young people to reflect critically on their own participation by developing their own projects and learning from that experience, so that we as researchers can in turn learn with and from young people. Within the constraints of a set timescale and multiple 'deliverables', we thus aimed to engage young people in exploring and articulating meanings of participation from their perspectives.

This paper reflects on our experiences of using action research with young people, drawing selectively on case study projects from across the PARTISPACE project. We aim to give an honest account of some of the challenges in realising the promises of (participatory) action research in practice. A central focus is on the way in which the action research played out in practice, on the power relationships between researchers and young people and how agendas are negotiated.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we discuss some key tenets of action research and what has been learned of the challenges and realities from other youth research

projects using action research, and introduce the PARTISPACE research as the context for the action research projects. Following this, we focus on three particular projects that offer contrasting examples of action research, exploring the ‘messy realities’ of action research with young people in practice in each case. Finally, we offer some concluding reflections.

## 2 Participatory action research with young people

In contrast to research where the agenda is defined by an academic ‘expert’, in Participatory Action Research (PAR) people engage with issues of mutual concern rooted in their own experience, with a view to finding ways of addressing the situation or problem. Researchers and activists have increasingly recognised the value of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) as an approach that enables participatory learning and change with young people (*McIntyre 2000; Cammarota/Fine 2008; Caraballo et al. 2017*). In the subsections below, we discuss five key features of this approach.

### 2.1 Exercising power and self-determination

At the heart of PAR is the assumption that people are well placed to research their own lives. *Quijada Cerecer, Cahill and Bradley (2013)* argue that YPAR provides a critical praxis for valuing knowledge created with young people in collaboration and action to challenge dominant discourses. Unlike many narratives of so called ‘participatory research’ in which the agenda is framed by professionals, in PAR participants are centrally involved in identifying the focus and methods of the inquiry. For some researchers, this means leaving young people to lead projects on their own without adult interference; here we argue for a more collaborative orientation. *Kim (2016, p. 43)* outlines three approaches to PAR with young people: adult-driven, youth-adult partnerships and youth-driven, but argues that in reality ‘it is uncommon for youth to conduct PAR projects alone’ and found that most cases involved youth-adult partnerships. *Kim’s* review highlights that, even in youth-led projects (e.g. *Suleiman et al. 2006*), adult researcher support can make a difference to success, for example by providing access to resources or providing training. However, this may be missing the point, since PAR is commonly understood to involve critically reflexive learning on the part of the researcher as well as the participants, which means that a level of direct researcher involvement is essential (*Weil 1998*). What appears central is not *whether* adults are involved, but how adults engage without imposing their agenda. Some observers make a distinction between ‘action research’ facilitated by an external researcher, and Participatory Action Research (PAR) which is self-initiated by the participants (*Cahill 2007; Reason/Bradbury 2001*). A key question that is central to this paper is the efficacy of action research approaches with young people that have been initiated by an outsider and the extent to which this affects the integrity of the action research process and outcomes.

## 2.2 Practice and experience-based

PAR is rooted in lived experience as a process of situated social learning (*Lave/Wenger* 1991) where people seek to better understand their situation or practice, in relation to an issue or problem affecting their lives. *Burke, Greene and McKenna* (2017, p. 590) contend that YPAR gives legitimacy to youth's experiential knowledge as a lens through which to define problems that have a direct impact on their day-to-day experiences' and involves young people having spaces to 'engage in critical, creative analysis of their lived experiences, while also resisting others' constructions of who they are.' In essence, YPAR involves young people researching their own lives, constructing narratives of change and questions to focus transformative action (*Rodriguez/Brown* 2009). This ideally involves learning and reflecting in, and on, action (*Schon* 1983) in iterative cycles of reflection, planning, action and observation (*Kemmis/McTaggart* 2008) all within the research process.

## 2.3 Collaborative and discursive

The idea of participatory research is that people engage with others around issues of mutual concern to agree and pursue a shared research agenda. Collaborative inquiry involves engaging in 'dialogic spaces of shared meaning' (*Rowell/Riel/Polish* 2018) to gain a better understanding of a situation from multiple perspectives (*Reason/Heron* 2008) and to collectively generate questions for further inquiry and action. *Wildemeersch et al.* (1998) refer to this as participatory social learning involving the harnessing of the experience and problem-solving potential a group possesses. Working collaboratively and relationally, power is shared with participants, contesting the emergence of dominant agendas and re-framing the researcher as a 'co-inquirer' who values participants' experience and ways of knowing as equal to their own (*Reason/Heron* 2008).

## 2.4 Critically reflexive and inquiry-based

In contrast to knowledge derived from answers to researchers' questions, learning in PAR involves participants engaging in critical questioning and reflective inquiry to understand better the forces that give rise to particular situations as well as their own position as part of the whole. *Cammarota and Fine* (2008, p. 4), drawing on *Freire's* (1970) praxis of critical reflection and action, refer to YPAR as a 'formal pedagogy of transformational resistance' involving 'young people undertaking their own engaged praxis – critical and collective inquiry, reflection and action focused on "reading" and speaking back to the reality of the world, their world' (2008, p. 1-2). They argue that through critical learning, young people can develop their own capacity for action in bringing about change. In essence, YPAR involves young people engaging together in a process of critical inquiry and action to understand and improve their world (*Reason* 1988; *Freire* 1970). Critical reflexivity is also relevant to the role of the external facilitator, who must continually reflect on their own role in relation to participants.

## 2.5 Generating actionable knowledge

Action research is fundamentally undertaken for the purpose of bringing about change, in thinking, or in action (*Kim* 2016). It is thus an experimental and exploratory process of understanding better how things are and becoming empowered to think and act differently. These processes destabilise traditional research approaches to open up new ways of thinking and acting, providing ‘a way of redefining knowledge as actions in pursuit of social justice’ (*Cammarota/Fine* 2008, p. 6).

## 3 Challenges and realities of Participatory Action Research with young people

Despite these aspirations and promises, there is limited evidence of the challenges and realities of undertaking action research with young people in practice. One key challenge is negotiating power relationships and roles between young people and adult facilitators. *Reason* (1994) sees this difficulty as inevitable given that most projects are initiated by adults, often with resources, skills and experience and an agenda linked to funding. *Burke et al.* (2017) argue that whilst young people can realise possibilities for having their voice, ultimately they have little power. Negotiating a relationship of trust is an important precursor to a successful action research project developing. This can be achieved by the adult researcher engaging in *gestures of authenticity* through negotiating young people’s involvement in ways that reconcile their terms of engagement with adult agendas, and which may determine whether they engage at all. *Perkins et al.* (2007) argue that if young people find the focus of the action research resonates with their own interests, and the process is fun, they are more likely to engage. Some writers highlight practical challenges in the form of time commitment and maintaining momentum with young people. The process-oriented nature of PAR necessitates a significant time commitment from young people involving conflicts with other commitments in their lives (*Cornwall/Jewkes* 1995; *Suleiman et al.* 2006). The unpredictability of youth attendance means that adults inevitably play a role in maintaining momentum within the group (*Nygreen/Kwon/Sanchez* 2006).

Technical and ethical challenges involve participants (and other stakeholders, such as funders and ethics committees) understanding that action research involves a different approach and a different conceptualisation of the value of knowledge. *Kim* (2016) argues that it is inappropriate to evaluate the quality of a PAR process against ‘scientific’ criteria. Potential conflicts concern validity and rigour, between what is meaningful and relevant for young people and scientific robustness of deliverables for academic and funders. In addition, PAR requires an ethic of practice in which findings are shared rather than protected, in order to inform future action (*Thomas/O’Kane* 1998). All these challenges were evident in the research presented here.

## 4 Action Research in PARTISPACE

PARTISPACE is one of several European research projects that seek to understand youth participation by including the perspectives of young people. The project has aimed at a fundamental re-thinking of youth participation. Rather than focus on the common question ‘do young people participate?’, it starts from the assumption that young people do participate but in different styles and spaces, not all of which are recognised by other societal actors. The project adopted a broad concept of participation which assumed that all actions carried out in, or addressing, the public may be understood as participation. This allowed us to look at actions not normally recognised as participation such as youth cultural practices, conflicts with authorities or other societal groups.

The research was undertaken in eight cities across Europe (Bologna, Eskişehir, Frankfurt, Gothenburg, Manchester, Plovdiv, Rennes and Zurich) and evolved in three broad phases. The first phase examined the context of policy and provision at national and European levels. The central phase consisted of extensive field research in the eight cities: mapping and expert interviews followed by ethnographic case studies of six settings in each city, and the action research projects. The final phase included thematic and comparative analysis and dissemination (including production of a training module for youth workers).

This article is based on the final action research phase of the fieldwork. In each city, up to three groups encountered in the mapping phase or in case studies were invited to carry out action research projects. This meant the researchers creating a context in which young people could develop their own projects to explore and understand the idea of participation in action. The aim was twofold: to give young people the possibility to generate the focus of research inquiries free from academic discourses and for researchers to learn from young people as they in turn learned experientially through their own participation processes. The projects were documented by young people using video and other media, while the processes were analysed at the national level and in an overall synthesis report (McMahon et al. 2018).

It is not claimed that these are classical examples of participatory action research (PAR). Indeed, the objective was not to undertake a model PAR project, but rather for young people to explore youth participation on their own terms, as far as possible within the limitations imposed by the constraints of a large funded project, with external time-scales and deliverables that were partly outside the control of the research team, and wholly outside the control of the young people. Within these constraints, our aim was to maximise freedom for young people to identify their own objectives, decide how they wanted to work and what outcomes they wanted to achieve. The role of the professional researchers was to provide support, guidance and resources when needed.<sup>3</sup> The PARTISPACE researchers came from a range of professional and disciplinary backgrounds; some had experience of action research whilst for others this was a new departure. Basic principles were agreed across the research consortium and guidance provided to all the national teams, but within these parameters each team was encouraged to find their own way of supporting the young people.

## 5 Outline of three empirical examples<sup>4</sup>

### 5.1 The Islamic Youth Association

The Islamic Youth Association (IYA) had been a case study for the ethnographic fieldwork. As researchers, our interest was in how young people deal with their 'hybridity' as Italians of foreign origin and Muslims. This was a 'hot topic' for the IYA, a national association of young people which aims to promote inclusion and civic engagement of young Muslims in Italian society and to counter prejudice. In exploring possibilities for action research, from informal conversations it appeared that the group had experienced a sharp fall in numbers participating. Attracting more young people was a major concern for the Association and so this became the focus for their project. The project developed in three phases:

- *Reflection*: individual and small group reflection on subjective understandings and experiences of participation in the IYA.
- *Discussion*: based on what emerged from reflection, the members of the IYA formulated a research question (how to attract new members) and decided on an initial course of action in the form of producing a promotional video.
- *Action*: Young people were given training in video-making, which enabled them to produce a video which was then shared with other young people.

### 5.2 The Girls' Group

The Girls' Group consisted of four girls aged between 11 and 12 who met regularly at a community youth centre in Zürich, as an informal peer group. The group was chosen for pragmatic reasons: after other groups cancelled their participation, informal contact with a network led to a youth worker reporting that he had a group of interested girls at his youth centre. The action research project was also characterised by three phases, but following a different 'logic' to the IYA project:

- *Discussion*: In discussion with youth workers and PARTISPACE researchers the girls decided that they would like to work on a video project and chose bullying as their topic.
- *Action*: The group formulated a twofold aim – to extend their own knowledge about bullying and to bring more public attention to the presence of bullying in society. They decided to do short street interviews and developed six interview questions. They conducted 15 interviews using video, eight with young people and seven with adults. Afterwards, they watched the interviews together and compared the answers.
- *Reflection*: Regular sessions with PARTISPACE researchers and youth workers; during one of these, the girls collected words they associated with the topic, which they then clustered to an image of bullying. Towards the end, the girls lost interest in the process of analysis.



### 5.3 Manchester Young Researchers (MYR)

This group emerged from discussions with Manchester Youth Council, one of the case studies. Researchers were interested in exploring how young people might participate outside such formal structures. An initial conversation with members identified a group interested in a project looking at processes of formal participation. Contact was lost for a time, and when it resumed the group had developed a strong interest in the issue of youth homelessness. Other young people not on the Youth Council joined the group through informal contacts, and the group established a separate identity. They met regularly with two PARTISPACE researchers throughout the project.

- *Discussion:* The group engaged in a series of discussions about how to respond to youth homelessness from which they decided to produce a video and a resource pamphlet for young people at risk, to direct them to sources of support.
- *Action:* Individuals took on different roles in order to complete the tasks identified – background research, interviews, the video, the leaflet, communication.
- *Reflection:* The group met regularly throughout to discuss progress and again at the conclusion of the project to reflect on the process and learning.
- *Dissemination:* Members of the group presented their research at a variety of events, locally and more widely.

## 6 The messy reality: reflections on the challenges of youth-led action research in practice

### 6.1 Ownership and self-determination: reconciling agendas

In the research with the Islamic Youth Association, conditions were favourable for mutual sharing of the process: the focus of the inquiry developed from the participants' interests, and researchers' and participants' motivations were complementary. The PARTISPACE researchers wanted to conduct action research on youth participation processes and engaged with young people facing a real problem connected to individual and collective everyday identity. (We also had a question concerning how young people deal with their 'hybridity', which was in tune with their experience and the aims of the IYA.) Thus, the project represented an authentic mutual sharing of aims. Young people felt meaningfully involved because the focus of the action research was close to their immediate concerns, while researchers wanted to understand in depth how the young people responded to the identity challenges they faced.

The Girls' Group's focus on bullying reflected their belief that it was a widespread problem and that information about its effects could reduce occurrence, and perhaps also sense of solidarity with other young people. The group decided to undertake further research with young people and adults to gain a broader understanding of people's experiences and attitudes with respect to bullying. In order to conduct the research, the internal relations in the group needed to be structured and task-focused, with the girls needing support from the youth worker to ensure that the work was completed in time. The youth worker supported the group in the preparation of the questionnaire, structuring the inter-

views, producing the video and supporting the self-documentation. The PARTISPACE researchers helped the group by revising the interview questions and facilitating the joint reflection rounds. Since the filming and shooting work had to be completed in four afternoons before the summer holidays, time pressure was high. This resulted in a planned joint reflection session having to take place after the shooting and editing. During this session it was clearly noticeable that both the desire for the film project and the concentration span of the girls had decreased due to other commitments. After the video was completed, the girls appeared to lose interest in the project; they moved on with their lives, and found new things to be engaged in.

With the MYR, we made sure that young people had freedom to identify a focus that reflected their own priorities, albeit within the parameters set by PARTISPACE. Young people acknowledged the value of having an ‘opportunity space’ for self-determined activity.

*“I like how we have the freedom, we don’t get controlled by it, because like in school, you’re controlled by teachers and stuff like that. But here you’re just kind of... you do it yourself, more independent.”*

Having provided such a space, we sometimes found that the young people had stalled in their initiative, as the following extract from field notes illustrates:

*What seems to happen is they come together and generate lots of ideas, and in spite of M’s efforts to pull these together into action plans, very little happens in between meetings.*

Rather than facilitating collaborative inquiry, we felt it important to pursue a more youth-led approach as a contrast to their experience in a more formalised context, although one result was that they did not follow a pure action research model (in contrast with the IYA project which adopted a more facilitative approach). In the MYR project distinct phases of learning, action and reflection were not evident, yet young people still progressed through processes of ‘learning in action’, as they figured out how to achieve the project aim, reflecting on progress and challenges as they emerged and action planning in the process.

## 6.2 Reflections on the value of knowledge in action research

In the IYA project, the researchers supported young people in achieving greater awareness of themselves and their milieu by taking action, exploring experiences and feelings of belonging and non-belonging. Their narratives showed that many felt trapped in an internal conflict as they “live between two realities and feel neither Arabic nor Italian but different” (focus group discussion). In small group discussions, they talked of a “struggle” involving culture, gender and generation. Boys and girls faced a choice to accept or refuse their fathers’ culture. On one hand, the claim to be different from mainstream Italian society is a way to respect their family background. On the other hand, the claim for ‘Italianness’ expresses a need for independence from family constraints. In this project, action research enabled young people to engage in a process of inquiry that opened up some of the nuances and complexity of young people’s experiences whilst simultaneously yielding benefits for young people through their direct involvement in a learning journey of personal and collective significance. The significance of knowledge derived from the action research process in this case study was not simply about the ‘rigour’ of data in a tradition-

al research sense in response to external research questions, but the extent to which the validity and relevance of the learning emerged out of the engagement of the young people themselves in their own inquiries in the context of their lived realities and in ways that enabled their own reflexive learning as Italian Muslims.

The Girls' Group learned from the action research that many people do not know what bullying is or how to address it. They agreed that more information and prevention should be undertaken, for example through a TV programme for adults and young people to raise awareness. At the final meeting the girls developed the idea to send their edited video to bullying information centres and ask for financial support to create such a programme. The group succeeded in generating knowledge about bullying, some of which surprised them also, and to that extent developed a greater understanding of the problem through undertaking the action research. For example, the girls were taken aback that the number of cases of bullying reported each year is unknown, while some of the people in their street interviews did not seem able to say much about bullying at all. The young women were also surprised to learn that the responses from adults and young people on the issue of bullying were not as different as they had predicted, and that young people did not know more about bullying than adults. In this case, whilst in many ways the young people involved followed a more traditional approach to the way they approached their project through undertaking interviews rather than through an action 'inquiry' process as adopted by IYA, in the process, rather than simply collecting data, the girls were continually 'surprised' by having their own assumptions challenged through what they found. For us as researchers, the tangible responses to interviews were not extraordinary or perhaps even significant; instead the value for us was in the way the girls participated and how they responded to the learning that emerged.

With MYR, knowledge was dynamic and emergent and was used by the young people to inform how they developed their project. They engaged in extensive discussion, checking and challenging each other and evolving a focus for the project as they engaged with the task, as the following extract from field notes illustrates:

*M: Homeless research has already been done.*

*R: So what can we do?*

*H: Things to alleviate... improve the situation.*

*D: It's important to be clear what this will involve and not biting off more than we can chew. We don't want to be seen that we [...] are engaging in something we can't deal with.*

*... Perhaps we could do something that leads into what we do as a youth council about homelessness*

*H: We could get a think tank together. exploring what the issues are and how we can respond.*

*R: So what are we actually going to do?*

They discussed and resolved issues as they emerged, demonstrating the importance of dialogue, social learning and emergence in participation. Although the young people were generally self-initiating, they appeared to value input from the researchers, to clarify, to challenge as well as suggest different approaches and offer 'reality checks' about being realistic in the time available.

In all of these case study projects, the objective was to learn about how young people participate when they have to decide on and evolve their own 'styles' of participation. The value of knowledge in these cases was not about the outcomes of the projects but firstly about the learning the young people derived from the process of undertaking these

PAR projects and secondly our learning as researchers from and with the young people as they undertook their projects about what it means for young people to participate in meaningful ways.<sup>5</sup>

### 6.3 Learning for active citizenship

Unlike volunteering, activism or other forms of civic engagement, participation in the IYA is mainly self- and group-oriented. Participation for these young people was a ‘coping strategy’ in their transition to adulthood in conditions of marginality. The action research project represented a useful tool to help young people to discuss, share and deepen understanding of their identity and social position, framing their difference not as a problem but as a resource, providing a different learning opportunity as they sought to give meaning to their own sense of active citizenship. During the project, the group explored different strategies for dealing with stereotypes: for example, some members made a video to relate their everyday experiences as Muslim girls facing western concepts of veiled women as victims, as isolated and oppressed. At the beginning of the project, girls and boys sat apart during the activities and also during breaks, but this gender divide gradually reduced during the year, almost disappearing by the end. The IYA offers a safe space where weaknesses are accepted, and the aim is to overcome those weaknesses together. In addition to the benefits they derived for dealing with their marginalized position as a group, the action research process also helped them to change the way they operated as an association. At the conclusion of the project, the participants had arrived at a method of working together that they hoped would make their meetings more reflexive and inclusive.

*“We dealt with serious issue, but, when you usually deal with serious issues you stay sit, you are serious, you talk one at a time. Sometimes it could get boring. Here we did it in a very funny way, differently from what we usually do.... We created the lanterns, with a story on each face... We felt more intimate.”*

*“To me, what came out tells a lot about how IYA should be! That is: it should be a place where people feel comfortable, say their own ideas, participate, are ready to stay at the Islamic Centre... till late... it meant that people were enjoying their time. (Group discussion, Islamic Centre)*

The Girls’ Group learned from their research that the responses of adults and young people did not differ very much, except that young people understood bullying more in physical terms, whereas adults focused more on verbal or psychological violence. The project aimed to build knowledge and understanding in order to act. During the joint reflection, they discussed what they could do about bullying. One girl thought she now could fight more actively against bullying. They talked about people they could inform, actions they could take, the value of saving evidence, albeit in serious cases anonymising personal data. The issues at the core of the project were not directly personal for these girls; in this sense, the project might be understood as a form of altruistic collective action. All the same the girls in the project aimed to find and implement solutions for the problem. The group appeared to see themselves as affected by the problem of bullying, but rather than *victims* they positioned themselves as *solidarity witnesses*. Their ambition was to improve the situation of young people who are victims of bullying, who in the project context can be understood as *beneficiaries*. The change they aimed was for focused on altering the

behaviour of bullies and increasing the supportive competence of other witnesses to bullying, and in that sense they positioned themselves as *educators*. They discussed informing others by sending the video to professionals working on the issue, and sharing what they had learnt with other young people. However, once the project came to an end, there were limited possibilities to follow through these proposed actions.

In contrast to projects that concerned identity and place in society, the MYR's focus was on addressing a wider social problem, in this case 'What can we do to respond to youth homelessness?' Questions like this reflect the potential of action research in going beyond generating new knowledge to develop young people's capability to participate as social and political actors, individually and collectively, in response to a shared concern. In the process, we gained insights into the realities of youth participation as they engage with power structures and their own sense of agency. Throughout the MYR project, the young people talked about having a public event. An initial idea was to project their film onto a city building for everyone to see; this later developed into the idea of a project launch with key officials present, and then a dialogue with city officials. To this end, whilst the project seemed to develop as a 'research' project, there were also clear aspirations for activism, education and dialogue to promote change. We observed however that young people are good at discussing ideas but may struggle with turning these into action. As the meetings progressed, ideas for action came and went. In planning how they would take forward and act on what they have achieved in their project, they engaged with the ambivalence of their position and different strategies; for instance, between being idealistic and being realistic, being ambitious but feasible, being outsiders but also insiders in the Council, and being on a social agenda not a political agenda.

*"We shouldn't be, like too big for our boots... we have to start small and then gradually grow."*

*"We need to be realistic but we do need to hold people to account; we need to stand our ground."*

While it might have been productive for the adult research facilitators to engage more actively with the young people, in reality the young people were able to benefit from thinking through the issues themselves.

## 6.4 Reflections on adult roles

From the beginning of work with the IYA, we assumed the position of *mandated facilitator*, and the group members as *mandating co-participants*. Our effort was to create an unstructured, informal, anti-authoritative, and non-hierarchical atmosphere in order to inspire a feeling of intimacy and develop a spirit of power equality. Our role in the discussion was to moderate, stimulate all the members to express their opinions, listen and give feedback, rephrasing and summarizing their narratives. We attempted to reduce as much as possible our adult and expert power to define, to speak, to decide on behalf of the young people, being aware of the risk of inadvertently adopting hierarchical relationships. Furthermore, we paid attention in proposing activities to ensure that all participants had equal access to discussion and self-presentation, to avoid bias and marginalization. The aim was to enable all participants to be engaged, ensuring that the research processes and outcomes would be authentic.

The research team's contact with the Girls' group during the project was indirect, via the youth worker who conducted the process with the girls. The youth worker's approach

tended to be quite directive based on an expressed view that the girls were too young to make decisions for themselves. Once the girls had chosen their topic, they formulated interview questions in discussion with the youth worker and conducted a pre-test. Then at a joint meeting with the Partispace researchers, the questions were discussed and adapted slightly. The girls, the youth worker, and the Partispace researchers had planned to watch the edited video together after the summer holiday followed by a final joint reflection on the action research process. However, on the day only one girl showed up. It was a sunny afternoon, and the other girls preferred to go to the swimming pool, ignoring telephone calls from the youth worker. The youth worker arranged another meeting, which did take place. This rescheduled reflection round was the most intensive contact between the young girls and the Partispace researchers. They talked in some depth about the learning processes and their findings on bullying. One girl said that it was surprising to her that bullying was not only limited to the playground and the school, but could also happen at work: “It has not been clear how, we always go to adults when there is something with us, and then that adults do the [bullying] too, that has been a bit unclear.”

Whether, when and how to intervene can be a challenge for professional researchers in projects such as the MYR project, as the following extract from field notes illustrates:

*At one point we invited them to consider whether there was a need for a resource booklet (for homeless people), but otherwise left them to decide. Is there integrity in adult roles in letting young people put in the effort in the name of self-determination, only to find such information already exists? When does involvement and facilitation become control? In the end, we decided to alert the issue of potential duplication with the young people then left it to them as to how they respond.*

In any situation where young people and adults engage together, there is a potential power differential. This demands a politics of co-production, where roles are negotiated reflexively in relation to specific situations. There is an assumption among some researchers that children and young people should be left to ‘get on with it themselves’ in participatory research. To some extent, this is a reaction to perceived oppression by adults who think they know what is best for children and young people. Whilst not accepting that all adult involvement is oppressive and inappropriate, we do argue for enabling young people to take on greater responsibility as autonomous social agents according to their capabilities and inclination, as an expression of active citizenship. If we are to value what adult researchers can bring, a critical question in action research with young people is how to make available existing knowledge and wisdom alongside young people’s own knowledge and wisdom, without prescribing and constricting the focus of the research. We are alluding here to reconstructing adult professional researcher roles from the ‘expert’ to being a support, a resource and a facilitator, rather than a controller, of learning in relationships of mutual learning and co-inquiry.

## 7 Conclusion

The EU project on which this paper is based sought to do justice to an action research process with a view to creating spaces for young people to explore, contest, and reconstruct knowledge and practice using their own terms of reference. As with many externally funded research projects, we of course came with an agenda – not seeking to control or predefine, but working within the parameters of agreed deliverables that accompanied

funding. Project researchers also came to the project from different academic standpoints and with different levels of experience of using action research. What we have provided here, therefore, is an honest critical reflection on the integrity and authenticity of using action research in this context. This was not about undertaking the perfect piece of action research in an ideal context, but about using action research as best we could to try and generate new insights and learning, in this case into youth participation, and the value of using action research to achieve that end. In conclusion we draw out some key issues.

Frequently in discourses of participatory research with children and young people, researchers are caught in a binary between youth-led and adult-led approaches in seeking to mitigate adult control. Evidence from this project suggests that young people often value and benefit from input from adults, or from more integrative co-inquiry based approaches in which young people and adults work together in relationships of mutuality and collaborative social learning. Whether projects are initiated by adults or young people, the underlying democratic ethos of action research is that people engage in a spirit of co-inquiry in which an implicit assumption for all stakeholders is the right to contest the position of others, with differences resolved through dialogue and negotiation.

Action research is not a one-off, in-and-out kind of research activity; it involves a commitment to an ongoing open-ended emergent process of inquiry, reflection and action. There are a number of issues here that are important in research with young people. First, we found that, in spite of beliefs amongst researchers that participative research is somehow beneficial for young people in extending greater degrees of power and freedom in the research process, in most cases young people are not queuing up to claim their right to a voice and to participation in the democratic process, let alone seeking emancipation. They may enthusiastically engage in a research process, but for most young people there are other commitments in their lives. Even those who articulate a sense of injustice about their situation are not solely concerned with fighting the system through participation in an action research process, but rather are preoccupied with everyday realities of housing, employment and survival. And for young people who are not in desperate situations, we found they have other commitments such as family responsibilities, exams and to other groups they might be involved with. To that extent there is arguably more integrity in understanding how young people participate in understanding and responding to issues they confront in their everyday lives, than in whether and how they utilise a particular research approach. However, we found that young people are most likely to engage and sustain commitment when the focus of the action research is intertwined with their own immediate concerns.

Second, undertaking action research with young people is not just a technical matter of implementing a method or collecting data in response to questions predefined by professional research agendas. It is a relational, dialogical, creative, and emergent process involving an open exploration of an issue or problem over time that has meaning and relevance for the participants themselves. It would be disingenuous for action researchers to insist on holding rigidly to principles of action research in project implementation. Instead, as we found in this project, there is value in providing a flexible and supportive space in which young people can explore, discuss, inquire, plan, act, reflect as well as have fun, socialise, and informally interact in ways they feel appropriate. The outcome seems often to be some kind of project work, which may be action or activism focused as with the MYR project, more research focused as with the Girls Group, or a combination of both as with IYA, which perhaps more than other projects offered an example of

Freire's praxis. To that end, all the projects generated valuable learning from action as young people engaged actively, but in their own way.

In contrast to romantic ideals that young people will readily lead PAR processes buoyed by revolutionary fervour in order to better understand and respond to their lived reality, many young people do not necessarily have the skills or inclination to engage without the initiative and support of adults. Within the context of this reality, the onus is on adult facilitators to maintain integrity in ensuring spaces for young people to realise the promise of participatory action research as far as is possible. Indeed, in contrast to fears of adults being oppressive and controlling, it does appear from the evidence of this project experience that facilitators may often be hesitant about their role in YPAR projects. As *Winn and Winn* (2016) reflect: 'In our efforts to decolonise research methods and practices, we lost sight of the fact that some youth might benefit from purposeful scaffolding such as 'guided participation' in YPAR to get to the phase where youth take ownership of the process and, when relevant, the product(s).' (p. 128). Through these case study examples, we have shown that action research provides an approach to research that generates new knowledge whilst simultaneously enabling young people to generate learning that is useful in the context of their own lives and according to their own agenda.

## Endnotes

- 1 The project was funded by H2020 Research and Innovation Programme Grant number 649416.
- 2 For more information, visit [www.partispace.eu](http://www.partispace.eu).
- 3 Each project had a sum of money available to be used in whatever way was most appropriate.
- 4 Different members of the international Partispace team worked with the various action research projects across the eight cities. The examples selected here are projects where the authors were directly involved.
- 5 Our learning is captured in *McMahon et al.* (2018).

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